

**FRIENDS OF THE RIVER CRANE ENVIRONMENT
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2012
REPORT FROM THE CHAIR**

Welcome and thank you for coming to our ninth Annual General Meeting. Next year marks the tenth anniversary for FORCE and tonight I would like to set out some of our ideas for next year as well as reviewing the activities of last year.

We have come a long way in the last nine years. The membership has grown steadily throughout this period and at the end of March this year it stood at 469, our highest ever. Our finances have also remained healthy over this period and I would like to thank the Membership Secretary and Treasurer in particular, as well as the knowledge and attention of all the Trustees, for delivering this.

I am very pleased that all the existing Trustees are standing for re-election and that Martin O’Gara is standing as a new Trustee. Martin has been volunteering with us for several years and last year joined the Trustees as a co-opted member for 12 months. We have greatly welcomed his contributions over this period and are very pleased that he has put himself forwards as a Trustee.

This time last year we were just starting to deal with the major pollution event of 26th October 2011, which effectively wiped out the middle and lower reaches of the Crane below the A4 crossing. The response to the pollution has been one of our major challenges of the last twelve months and we will be reporting separately on this later in the meeting.

Another major task this year has been to investigate the options, and take forward the process, of incorporation. A sub-committee was set up and they will present a separate report later this evening. It only falls to me to thank all those Trustees for their hard work on this task.

The Priority Parks project was completed in the last year and some of the final components, such as three new carved benches bringing our total to ten, have only been installed in the last few weeks. This summer the combined Richmond and Hounslow parts of Crane Park were awarded a Green Flag for the first time and this served to underline the progress that has been made. One summer Sunday we surveyed the number of visitors to the park and counted around 1500 crossing between Crane Park and Kneller Gardens whilst over 400 visited the Hounslow side of the park. These numbers amply illustrate the popularity of the park with local people; and the Hounslow side now contrasts starkly with the empty and derelict looking space we witnessed before the project began.

I spoke last year about our discussions with the council and developers on the Twickenham Station and the Post Office Sorting Office sites. One year on and nothing is resolved on either site. We remain hopeful that any development on these sites will result in more public open space along the river as well as a footpath linking Moormead Park through the station to Craneford Fields. However there remains plenty of work to be done to achieve these objectives.

This summer we launched the Outdoor Classroom packs at the Sustainable Education conference at Hampton School. These packs provide lesson plans across all parts of the curriculum for teachers of infant and primary school children. They are designed for the

outdoor classroom areas of Mereway Nature Park, Kneller Gardens and Crane Park and can be adapted for use elsewhere.

There has been an encouraging increase in the level of catchment wide activity along the Crane and FORCE has taken a full part in this. The Crane Valley Partnership continues as a forum for all the organisations with an interest on the Crane and its importance should grow with the implementation of the Thames Water funding from next year. Earlier this year the GLA completed the first phase of work on the All London Green Grid – the Crane is recognised as an important green corridor for London and the report identifies over 100 potential environmental and open space improvement projects opportunities in the Crane valley. The Environment Agency has also selected the Crane as a national pilot catchment plan. Both these projects are promoting joined up thinking for improving the environmental and community value of the Crane and will subsequently be of great benefit in supporting funding applications.

Looking forwards to next year there are plenty of new projects in the pipeline. One of our main areas of interest is likely to be Pevensey Road Nature Reserve – this is a beautiful and little known area immediately upstream from Crane Park. There are opportunities here to improve public access and the challenge will be to achieve this whilst also protecting and improving the natural environment. Pevensey is one of five areas around Crane Park targeted by Richmond council's "people in parks" programme and we are hopeful that this will build upon the success of the Priority Parks project and further extend the public open space along the Crane. The Environment Agency is proposing to remove Mill Road weir from the Crane in Crane Park later this year. The project needs to be developed and managed sensitively, and could then lead to significant environmental benefits in the central part of Crane Park. FORCE intends to monitor both projects closely, and we hope that the added support of a Crane Valley project officer, funded by Thames Water, will help to co-ordinate these and other projects.

All these projects will require collaborative working between many interested parties. We are promoting the community as a key interested party in all these projects. Wherever possible we would like to see new Friends groups created to help manage their local space and we hope to be able to help in this process. We are also championing the use of volunteer groups to implement the schemes. This approach worked very successfully on the Priority Parks project and, when done well, provides both a sympathetic development and the capacity for longer term community led maintenance.

Finally, we are currently working with London Wildlife Trust to set up a three day conference on the River Crane for next October. This conference will be open to all members of the public and would be focused on gathering best practice ideas for improving and managing urban rivers and then applying them to the River Crane. The conference is intended to raise the profile of the Crane and pool ideas for the next five years of river improvements. We look forward to working with our Friends and other partners to make this happen.

Thank you for all your help and support in making this another successful year

Rob Gray
Chair of FORCE
November 2012